

HOWARD TAYLOR RICKETTS



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Howard Taylor Ricketts

1871 — 1910

Introduction

Among the many illustrious sons of Northwestern, no name looms larger than that of Howard Taylor Ricketts. The least his Medical Alma Mater can do is to perpetuate his memory in the belief that his example will kindle the hearts and the minds of youth. Society needs to preserve and uphold highmindedness, idealism, and the search for truth, all of which Howard Ricketts, personified.

Northwestern University has a duty to perform in the creation of a substantially endowed foundation that shall bear his name. In furtherance of the project a committee has been formed to receive contributions. It is anticipated that the goal, namely \$100,000 will be achieved

within a reasonable time. All funds received will be deposited with the Trustees of Northwestern University for conservation and administration. The fund will be permanent and only the income thereof will be utilized.

As one who knew Howard Ricketts rather intimately at the University of Nebraska—it is not too much to say that no member of that student body was more beloved or represented a higher type of character than the youth who was to become a martyr to science.

Irving S. Cutter

HOWARD TAYLOR RICKETTS

by Charles A. Elliott



HE name of Howard Taylor Ricketts, Northwestern University Medical School, Class of 1897, is inscribed for all time on the honor roll of medical achievement, among the heroes of medical science.

Doctor Ricketts was born on a farm in Hancock County, Ohio, on February 9, 1871. When he was two years of age, his father, then a farmer, moved his family to Illinois, and later, when Ricketts was seven, settled in the small village of Fisher in Champaign County, and engaged in the grain business. They were religious people, members of the Methodist Church, determined to give their children a college education, and Northwestern University was the college of their choice.

Howard Ricketts attended Northwestern Academy, Evanston, Illinois in preparation for college, and while there first met Myra E. Tubbs of Kirkwood, Illinois —an acquaintance and friendship which finally culminated in their marriage twelve years later. He entered Northwestern University in 1890. He was a superior student; was admitted to the Delta Upsilon Fraternity; played base-ball on the University team; was a member of the Glee Club; and was elected manager of the *Syllabus*, an annual University publication. The family fortunes, shaken by the economic depression of the early nineties, made it necessary for him to interrupt his college career at Northwestern at the end of his sophomore year, and with his family he moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where he entered the University of Nebraska as a Junior in the fall of 1892. His unusual earnestness and ability as a student received early recognition by his instructors and classmates both

at Northwestern and Nebraska. At Lincoln his intimate friends and associates included among many others, John J. Pershing, Roscoe Pound, Dorothy Canfield, Willa Cather, and Edward P. Elliott—all sons and daughters of pioneers—forming a remarkable group of rather serious minded young people, as such things are judged in retrospect.

About this time reversals in the family fortunes of the Ricketts family were extreme, and henceforth he was obliged to support himself while pursuing his studies. This he did by arduous labor, often drudgery. During the next few years he was compelled to resort to many expedients to earn the funds needed to carry on; he delivered newspapers, sold tickets at an amusement park, sang in the church choir, taught zoology, tutored, and slept in a doctor's office, answering night calls. Under Gustave Chanute, pioneer student of aviation, he served as cook and general handy-man on an expedition to the Indiana Dunes

during the summer of 1895. The expedition was organized for the purpose of studying the principles of flight by heavier-than-air craft, and brought about the fortuitous association of these two pioneers in divergent fields of scientific endeavor.

He entered Northwestern University Medical School in the fall of 1894, graduating in 1897. The senior year was difficult. The strain of preparing himself for the Cook County Hospital examinations undermined his health. He was frail, over-worked, worn, and finally was compelled to leave school, returning at the end of the academic year, just as the hospital examinations were starting. He had regained his health but had lost much time from his studies and against his better judgment, was induced to take the examinations without further preparation. He succeeded in securing one of the coveted appointments, thus fulfilling his ambition. Thereafter his progress in medicine was uninterrupted.

On completing his internship at Cook County Hospital he accepted an appointment as Fellow in Dermatology at Rush Medical College. In 1902 he received an appointment as Instructor, and later as Associate Professor in Pathology and Bacteriology at the University of Chicago. In 1910, the year of his death, he accepted an appointment as Professor of Pathology at the University of Pennsylvania, which post he was destined never to fill.

Throughout his career Ricketts exhibited unusual traits of character. He had courage and an unswerving devotion to an ideal. He was industrious, able to work under adverse conditions, and never shirked a task, no matter how menial. His natural ability for scientific investigation was early apparent to all who knew him; he was a clear thinker and became an investigator of the first rank.

Within a life span of but thirty-nine years, Ricketts, supported by the McCormick

Institute of Infectious Diseases and the University of Chicago, and encouraged by his friend, Dr. Ludvig Hektoen, added much to our knowledge of infectious diseases. Among other investigations he contributed an exhaustive study of blastomycosis, then a little known disease. During the course of this investigation he inoculated himself with the virus of this disease. At that time blastomycosis was assumed to be a readily controlled infection of the skin only. He developed however, a generalized infection, a serious form of the disease, now, but not then, recognized. Fortunately he recovered, but not without grave concern to his colleagues.

Ricketts demonstrated the cause and indicated the method of prevention of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, a virulent disease then prevalent in certain mountainous districts of our western states. He proved the transmission of the virus of Spotted Fever through ticks, commonly found in great

numbers in the infested valleys of Montana, and demonstrated that the bite of the infected adult tick conveyed the disease to man. The tick reaches its adult stage only during the spring of the year. The heretofore unexplained seasonal prevalence of the disease in man was thus clearly elucidated. The genetic name, "Rickettsia" is now applied to this and similar organisms causing a number of infections to which man is susceptible. Because of certain peculiarities, which Ricketts believed Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever had in common with Typhus Fever, his interest in the latter was stimulated.

Typhus fever is a devastating world scourge of poverty, filth, and war, which within historic times has claimed its millions. He determined to investigate typhus, then endemic in Mexico, and in December 1909, journeyed to Mexico City, prepared to study its cause and mode of transmission. He was accompanied by Dr. Russell M.

Wilder, now of the Mayo Clinic, as a voluntary assistant. As a result of his labors the mode of spread of typhus fever from man to man by way of the body louse (*pediculosis vestimentorum*) was demonstrated incontrovertably. In addition he found an organism of the Rickettsia group in the blood of typhus fever patients and in the fluids of infected body lice.

His work concluded and his reports written—another milestone was erected in the progress of medical science. Ricketts unfortunately contracted typhus fever, and died of its ravages on May 3, 1910, a sacrifice to human welfare. On May sixth, three days following his death, an unsigned editorial appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, in part, as follows:

“The death of Dr. Howard T. Ricketts adds another name to the long honor roll of science. The endless warfare that mankind has fought against ignorance and its child, disease, has claimed another victim, but the

fight goes on. Doctor Ricketts left his unfinished investigations to his fellow workers in the field of medical research. But he left something much more precious to his fellow men—the example of a high courage and devotion in the cause of humanity. Doctor Ricketts died on the firing line of human progress, and it is inspiring to believe, as we may, that he did not die in vain. Mankind is richer for his living and nobler for his dying.”

The results of Doctor Ricketts' investigations pointed the way to the control of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever of our Western states, and were instrumental in stimulating the delousing activities of the armies during the World War, preventing the spread of typhus fever which had already made its appearance and which otherwise would have proved disastrous.

Northwestern is proud of this illustrious son whose achievements, although prematurely interrupted, have meant so much to humanity.

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HOWARD TAYLOR RICKETTS FOUNDATION

Believing in the purposes and objects of the Howard Taylor Ricketts Foundation, I desire to have a part in its creation, and subscribe the sum of \$ _____, with the understanding that all funds contributed will be conserved and administered by the Trustees of Northwestern University, an Illinois corporation.

Signed _____

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Detach and Mail to

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